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William Thomas Generous, *Sweet Pea at War: A History of USS Portland (CA-33)*

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Many books have been written about aircraft carriers, battleships and even destroyers. Unfortunately, very few books have been written about cruisers. Thomas Generous' book *Sweet Pea at War: A History of USS Portland (CA-33)* corrects that deficiency in this study on one of the most remarkable ships that served during World War II and afterwards. Built by Bethlehem Steel in the Quincy, Massachusetts shipyards, the keel for the *Portland* was laid in 1931 as part of the Navy's attempt to build up to the terms of the London Naval Treaty, and had a displacement of just under 10,000 tons. The *Portland* had a length of 610 feet in length, 66 feet in maximum beam or width, and drew about 22 feet from the keel to the waterline in the forward part of the ship, 'a little more aft' as the author wrote. She had armor that ranged from a high of 5.75 inches at her magazines to a mere 2.6 inches on her side. In fact, as the author contends, "she carried less protective armor than was customary for heavy cruisers." The *Portland* boasted nine 8-inch guns, three each in two turrets forward and one turret aft; eight 5-inch dual-purpose guns in single mounts, four to a side; and a host of smaller anti-aircraft (AA) guns that varied in caliber from time to time as the ship was repeatedly modernized.

What made the *Portland* unique, however, was the fact that she, and her sister ship, the ill fated *USS Indianapolis* had huge fuel tanks giving them an extremely long

range. During World War II the extra fuel tanks permitted the *Portland* to remain on station longer and thus able to provide close-in fire support as well as carrier or battleship escort. In fact, the *Portland* could carry 900,000 gallons of oil, stored in sixty-six tanks of various sizes spread throughout the ships.

The *Portland*, in fact, was an engineering marvel, as it boasted fresh water evaporators that enabled the ship to convert seawater into fresh drinking water. Also, each of the ship's firerooms was connected to its own separate source of oil so that no single shell or bomb could knock out the fuel supply to all the boilers. These and other features enabled the *Portland* to remain at sea for extended periods of time that during the war, proved to be invaluable.

The *Portland* entered the fleet in May 1933 and immediately began a regular routine of naval exercises and endless hours of training in such areas as gunnery, seamanship, and damage control drills. As the author wrote, "this proved to be the salvation of the ship and crews as World War II demonstrated." While the ship drew praise on her seamanship, it was in the fields of gunnery and damage control that "saved her on at least two occasions" in naval engagements against the Japanese. In fact, as Generous indicated, the interwar era, particularly the 1930s, proved to be the savior of the naval services, including the Marine Corps, as both services, due to the limited numbers of men, were able to emphasize training and doctrine, both of which would pay off after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The *Portland* took the brunt of the Japanese attack on 7 December 1941 along with many other ships moored along "Battleship Row," at Pearl Harbor when Vice Admiral Chuichi Nagumo and his *Kido Butai*, a powerful battle fleet of six carriers, two battleships, fleet oilers, screening cruisers, and destroyers struck the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Hawaii. Ironically, the *Portland* had just, in fact, pulled into the Hawaiian naval base only a week before the Japanese struck. Fortunately for the ship and her brave crew, she had been assigned to escort the *USS Lexington* in order to deliver aircraft to the American air base on Midway Island. News of the attack prompted the crew of the *Portland* to strip off the fine polished deck to prepare her for what would be a long war. During the Battle of Coral Sea, *Portland* rode "shotgun" for the *USS Yorktown* sustaining several hits and taking four casualties as she picked up the survivors of the *USS Lexington* that had been

sunk during the battle. Generous' description of this battle and the subsequent Battle of Midway, where Navy pilots sank four Japanese carriers and turned the tide of the war in the Pacific in favor of the Allies, is well and graphically described along with the *Portland's* role in these two battles. Indeed, the fact that the author relied on many first-hand accounts made it possible for him to faithfully recount the battles of Coral Sea and Midway. This in turn gives the reader a better sense of life and reactions of the crews aboard the *Portland* as she steamed into battle.

For the next three years, the *Portland* participated in every major naval engagement of the Pacific War especially the night cruiser actions off Guadalcanal during the battle for Savo Island. While rightfully praiseworthy of the fighting spirit and leadership of both Rear Admirals Norman Scott and Daniel Callaghan, the author is nonetheless critical of the tactics they employed during this momentous sea battle. While critical of the tactics at Savo Island, Generous makes great effort to explain the fact that both Admirals Scott and Callaghan, both of whom were killed in the fighting, followed navy doctrine to the letter in their attempt to "cap the enemy's `T'" in the 13 November 1942 nighttime engagement. Generous, however, criticized the manner in which Callaghan handled his convoy when he wrote that the "errors say volumes about Callaghan's incompetence in commanding a major naval task force in a life or death struggle." Generous is less critical of Admiral Norm Scott though remains convinced that had both men been better trained to fight a night engagement that battle of "Iron Bottom Sound" might have ended on a much different note. As for the *Portland*, she was severely damaged in the Battle of Savo Island, having lost her ability to steer. Despite being out-gunned, the crew of the *Portland* nevertheless managed to sink a Japanese destroyer, due once again to their excellent gunnery training.

After the fighting off Savo Island, the *Portland* went into dry dock in order to repair her steering and the other damage inflicted upon her by the Japanese Navy. Despite the horrific losses in men, ships, and material during this epic sea battle, Admiral William F. "Bull" Halsey nonetheless had managed to buy the Marines and Soldiers on Guadalcanal precious time as the Navy once again turned back a major Japanese invasion fleet. Towed to dry dock in Sydney, Australia, the crew of the *Portland* enjoyed a brief respite from the war as the ship underwent repairs. The "Sweet Pea" as the *Portland* was

affectionately referred to by her crew re-entered the fleet just in time to participate in the campaigns in the Central and the Southwest Pacific Areas. The *Portland*, in fact, went on to participate in the campaigns in the landings on Tarawa (Betio) in November 1943, the Marshall Islands (Eniwetok, Kwajalein, and Roi-Namur) in February-March 1944 where the crews skillfully and effectively employed their 8-inch guns against Japanese defenses on these islands.

One of the most interesting and perhaps most detailed chapters are the descriptions of what life was like aboard a ship during war. Through first-hand accounts, Generous provided the reader with a sense of how the Sailors aboard the *Portland* went about their daily activities and lived with the ever-present fear of being torpedoed or blasted from the waters by Japanese submarines or ships. The author's meticulous description of eating, sleeping, and resting aboard the *Portland* is both accurate and most entertaining chapters in the book. In fact, for anyone who has been to sea, this chapter will almost certainly bring back both fond and not-so-fond memories of eating and sleeping aboard a pitching ship.

The author provides an excellent description of *Sweet Pea's* last campaigns during World War II that included the Battle for Leyte Gulf (24 October 1944) at the Surigao Strait, where she fought it out with a Japanese battleship in a nighttime battle, and the Okinawa Campaign (April-June 1945). It was at Leyte Gulf that the *Portland* 'took her place' in the battle history of the U.S. Navy when she dueled with a Japanese battleship. The intensity of the battle can be seen in the fact that during the battle for Surigao Strait, the ship fired 327 of her armor-piercing rounds and that by the end of the day, she had only six salvos left from her main battery. Fortunately, the Japanese Navy once again chose to retreat in what her commanders thought was a superior U.S. Naval force.

During the landings on Okinawa (1 April 1945), *Sweet Pea's* guns provided pinpoint naval gunfire support for the Marines and Soldiers as they stormed ashore. Because Okinawa was considered by the Japanese to be home soil, her soldiers, sailors and airmen fought to the death in their vain hope that the Americans would tire of such enormous casualties. It was at both Leyte Gulf and later Okinawa that the sailors of the *Portland* experienced the desperation of the Japanese as they attempted to stave off

defeat through the employment of the dreaded kamikazes (*Divine Wind*) against the American and British fleets anchored off the island. Here, the *Portland*'s anti-aircraft guns warded off wave after wave of the oncoming Japanese suicide pilots. Like the other ships in the fleet, *Portland* sustained heavy damage though managed to remain afloat and in the thick of the fighting throughout the entire campaign. As the *Portland* sailed into Buckner Bay on Okinawa on 6 August 1945, word reached the ship that the Japanese had surrendered. After re-fitting and loading on fresh supplies, *Sweet Pea* headed toward Tokyo Bay where she participated in the surrender ceremonies on 1 September 1945.

After a brief respite back in Brooklyn, New York, the Navy assigned *USS Portland* to assist in the transporting of U.S. troops from the European Theater of Operations. During this operation, a powerful hurricane battered the ship's keel. Due to her solid construction, however, the *Portland* was able to withstand the storm's crushing winds and swells. In 1959, the Navy de-commissioned the *Portland* and was stricken from the records and sold for scrap. In a lasting tribute to the bravery of her crew and of the ship's fighting legacy, however, the Sailors who fought and lived on her began holding annual reunions that, as the years went by became a time to reminisce of the war years and to recall former crew members who 'returned to the sea' for the last roll call.

Sweet Pea At War is an excellent book that is detailed, superbly written, and carefully researched. This is a book that will appeal to expert and novice alike of naval warfare. It is a text that all naval and even Marine Corps historians should have in their professional libraries. Generous' book is more than about a ship, it is about *a ship and crew* that refused to quit fighting and during the course of World War II became a legend in the battle history of the U.S. Navy.



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